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ABSTRACT

The procedures for the selection of a test population to use and evaluate the short units developed by the Sociological Resources for the Social Studies Project (SRSS), "Episodes in Social Inquiry Series," are considered. They wanted to assess the effectiveness of the materials under a variety of circumstances: classes from different parts of the country, from communities of various sizes and economic strata, with students of several ability levels, in a variety of social studies courses, in both large and small schools. Some of the problems discussed are: 1) school selection by geographical location; 2) working with the authority structure in public school systems; 3) deciding which contact in a school would be most receptive; 4) selecting the participant classes within a school; 5) soliciting the cooperation of the teachers; 6) establishing clear communications with the teachers about their role, the experimental nature of the episodes, and the desire for honest and candid feedback. The project concluded: when formative evaluation is the goal and time is an important factor, a test population selected on the basis of who will complete evaluation tasks is more important than a representative sampling of the total universe of potential users. ED 035 583 and SO 000 246 are related documents. (SBE)

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SELECTING A TEST POPULATION FOR EVALUATING THE SOCIOLOGICAL RESOURCES PROJECT MATERIALS[1]

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Sociological Resources for the Social Studies is a project of the American Sociological Association, supported by the National Science Foundation. In existence since 1964, SRSS was mandated to produce three sorts of materials for the secondary school social studies curriculum: a series of paperback books containing significant sociological articles rewritten for high school students and topically compiled, a one semester sociology course, and a series of some forty episodes, each dealing with a sociological topic, designed to be integrated into existing social studies courses, and incorporating an inquiry approach to teaching and learning. This paper will consider the selection of a test population for the episodes; the development of these two-week units has constituted the main activity of SRSS. The evaluation is in its final stages with the last six episodes being field tested this semester. It began in 1966; since that initial effort procedures and techniques have undergone many changes.

We made an initial decision to test the episodes in pairs, using the students studying one episode as control for the other. This was accomplished by administering the forty-item multiple-choice test covering one episode as a pretest to the 1500 students who were to study its counterpart. This procedure is still being used.

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[1] This paper is one part of a symposium on evaluation of social studies curriculum projects presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Minneapolis, March 2-6, 1970.

[2] From 1966 to 1969 Mr. Grahlfs was Supervisor of Evaluation, Sociological Resources for the Social Studies.

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One of the first steps in the evaluation was the selection of a test population, a term which was substituted for sample because we had made certain arbitrary decisions regarding its composition rather than making a totally random selection. We wanted to assess the effectiveness of our materials under a variety of circumstances, so we included classes from different parts of the country, from communities of various sizes and representative of a variety of economic strata. We were also interested in obtaining students of several ability levels, in a variety of social studies courses, in both large and small schools.

The project had, at the time, been in existence for two years and we had an ample file of names of teachers who had written expressing interest in the project and the materials it was developing. We rejected, at this point, a suggestion to draw our test population from such a file, on the assumption that is consisted of teachers who might be categorized as atypical of all potential users of the material. We decided instead to have the test population drawn for us by a contractor,[3] according to specifications which we would determine.

Our first consideration was geographic distribution. It was decided to use a "cluster" approach, drawing an equal number of schools from each of four major census regions in the United States. Primarily for convenience in visiting the schools involved, we focused our test populations around New York City on the East Coast, Los Angeles on the West Coast, New Orleans in the South and, in the Midwest, around Indianapolis and Des Moines. High refusal rate, coupled with time pressure caused by the early start of summer vacations in that region led us to augment the southern cluster by including some schools in Tennessee. In

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[3] Ultimately, the contractor chosen for this and for testing and statistical work, was The Psychological Corporation.

our instructions to the contractor we specified a stratified random selection of schools in the designated areas. One of the two dimensions on which they were to stratify was communities classified into "metropolitan," "suburban," and "all other." The second dimension was the size of the student body.

Having resolved the question of school selection, we faced the dilemma of deciding which contact in the school would be most receptive. Our initial request was made to the high school principal. In retrospect, this seems to have been a reasonably good choice. In most cases the principal passed the request along to his social studies chairman who contacted us; in some instances he sent us the name of his superior through whom we would have to operate. We did lose some of the selected schools through this procedure, either because the principal was not much interested and didn't pass the letter on or because the assistant superintendent or coordinator felt we had bypassed him and vetoed the entire matter.

We did get a variety of classroom situations. We also learned a few things about the structure of authority in public schools.

Our planning for the 1967-68 series of trials began early, and was both elaborate and ambitious; we wanted to improve upon our previous performance. Speaking in retrospect, we merely created more work for ourselves. We hired a specialist in sampling who made a random selection of ten states stratified by geographic region and by per capita expenditure on education. We then obtained from the National Association of Science Teachers, a list of all secondary schools in those states, indicating the number of social studies teachers in each. From this our specialist provided us with a sample of schools. When we had obtained consent of the necessary personnel (this time we started with the superintendent) we sent a form to the social studies chairman, asking him to list all teachers in his department and the classes they taught. Using a table of random numbers, we selected classes and solicited cooperation from the teachers.

Our purpose was to eliminate the bias of self-selection; it didn't work. We encountered an excessive refusal rate and many substitutions were made, not only by us, but by the people in the schools. We did, however, profit by previous experience in one way. As soon as the states had been selected we sent a letter to the top educational administrator and the state social studies coordinator in each, informing them of our plans; when the schools had been selected we wrote first to the superintendent of schools; after a reasonable time, if we had no response we wrote to the principal. We touched all bases in the "chain of command." This proved to be a wise policy.

At the end of this second year we again reviewed our experience and concluded that the "cluster" approach of the first year was much more usable, and that we should return to it. We could, we felt, improve upon the cluster approach by having a single person through whom we would communicate in each area.

We selected areas which we felt gave reasonable geographic diversity and relied on our professional contacts to establish harmonious liaison with the social studies supervisor in each. These supervisors would help us select schools reflecting the desired diversity of social and economic characteristics and would advise us concerning rural schools reasonably close to the city and suburbs.

Under this plan, we obtained the cooperation of social studies coordinators from Seattle; Minneapolis; New Orleans; Cleveland; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Hartford, Connecticut. More importantly, perhaps, we obtained consent of their school systems for these people to act as our agents in enlisting participating teachers. These people were then brought to SRSS headquarters in Ann Arbor for a thorough one-day briefing on materials and procedures.

This has clearly been a most satisfactory approach. We obtained the variety of classrooms we desired, we had a clearer line of communication, and people close to the "firing line" who could both coordinate and trouble shoot.

There were the usual (and some unusal) problems. Some episodes had more appealing titles than others and we could not always get the full complement of fifty classes for each. The supervisors were reticent to use a heavy hand in suggesting that teachers accept an episode which they had not originally requested; we did not want to encourage them to do this, not only because we thought it might create a negative bias, but because we felt teachers should not be compelled to teach material not in agreement with their goals. In one city the AFT contract made teacher participation meager, and we had to seek more teachers in the other clusters. Although we agreed to pay teachers a small honorarium for completing our lengthy questionnaire, some kept the materials in lieu of honorarium. Some teachers failed to understand their role, and used the episodes in situations of little use to us. No matter how hard we tried, one of our most difficult problems was the establishment of clear communcations with the teachers about their role, the experimental nature of the episodes, and our desire for honest and candid feedback. The pre and posttest situation was especially confusing; many students and teachers simply could not understand why we administered a test over material which had not been studied, and which would not be studied. Because we knew that the final, published product would not be distributed with personal advice about its use, we avoided pre-evaluation visits to the teachers, hoping to insure a realistic trial. Despite these problems we were able to select what seemed to be a test population which provided us with the necessary formative feedback for revision.

This year we have made only one major change in the selection process. Two systems were especially successful in enlisting a large number of teachers and we asked them to continue their affiliation with us another year. To these we added three areas not previously used: Atlanta, Miami, and the San Francisco Bay Area. In each of these areas the National Science Foundation was supporting

in-service institutes in sociology and we decided to include participants in those institutes in our evaluation. Because the institutes included on their staffs supervisors from the school systems, the selection of a test population was accomplished in much the same manner as before. Some teachers in these areas were not enrolled in the institutes and we encouraged them to evaluate episodes so that we could get a variety of teacher backgrounds.

It is too soon to tell if this use of in-service institutes has made much difference in the quality of the evaluation; it has made the selection of a test population much easier. Because teachers can look over an episode together, and discuss it during the institute meetings, we have come closer to our goal of fifty classes for each episode.

Our conclusion will not surprise those who have been involved in similar efforts, but it may offend some in the research community. When formative evaluation is the goal, and when time is an important factor, a test population selected on the basis of likelihood that they will complete evaluation tasks far outweighs in advantage a more representative sampling of the total universe of potential users of the materials.